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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to show teachers that composing is the conveying of "knowing" and that students' growth in writing is frequently stunted by teachers' stress on correct spelling, word choice, and syntax in student writing. Topics discussed in the paper include the following: the presence of "memories and experiences, cinemas, radio programs, and family albums" in the minds of all people, glimpses of which can be revealed in writing; the differing functions of the right and left hemispheres of the brain; stages of the writing process, which progress from the writer's "knowing" to the writing of words on paper; the way students' apprehension of writing impedes the composing process; studies indicating that teachers of writing frequently do not recongize good writing; an experiment in which teachers are helped to see the subjective nature of learning and the irrelevance of grading; the ways in which writing differs from reading; and the importance of the prewriting or expressive stage of writing, at which the writer should feel free to "spill out lumps of think" on paper (a function of the right hemisphere of the brain) without worrying about correct spelling and mechanics (a function of the left hemisphere). (GW)

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COMPOSING: The Art of Letting Your Right Brain Recognize What Your Left Brain Is Recalling

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I fail to compose when I let spelling, the correct word or the appropriate syntax get in the way of my knowing. As teachers of writing we stunt students' growth in writing by endorsing such dangerous notions as "How can a student write if he can't spell?" "He's got to know his grammar before he can write." "I teach students to write the sentence first. Otherwise, they will never be able to write a paragraph, let alone an essay or a story." Implicit in these remarks is the mug/jug theory of learning. Students' heads are empty vessels and the teacher is the pitcher, ready to fill up the mugs.

Fear of putting pen to paper builds apprehension in students' minds from the time they are in elementary schools on into their college years. A large percentage of any population will have poor handwriting, another large percentage of that population will have poor spelling, and another large percentage will have problems with syntax, and on and on in the case of each discrete aspect that makes up written prose. Some individuals will have problems in all the areas, but the total number of persons having any problem will range from 80% to 90% of the population. If a child fails in any of these areas, he may learn to dread writing.

Every normal child has movies going on in his head. He has whole experiences that he can convey--what was on T.V. last night, what he did last

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night, what he did last summer, etc. If he becomes apprehensive when the teacher asks him to speak or write, he will stutter and stumble, uttering or writing the minimum response.

What I mean by composing is conveying knowing, which may be meaningful only to the composer. But a composition is a whole discourse. Yetta Goodman says, "The content of language is wholeness." The content of knowing is wholeness, too. Good composing is whole and honest. It makes good reading even though it doesn't look good. These remarks may seem simplistic, paradoxical, and contradictory, but bear with me.

I have a kind of cinema in my mind, but it is also a radio program and a family picture album. I want to communicate it to you so that you can reconstruct that motion picture, but all I have to work with when I write is the sound-tract-script that I convey in print. If I try a new dish at a Greek restaurant, dolmathes for instance, I might find that the meal was delicious. So, I have a picture of that entree that I store in an album of pictures in my mind. Two months later I go to another Greek restaurant. Scanning the menu, I see that the chef also serves dolmathes. I order it. The dish may live up to my expectations, duplicating the subject of the earlier photograph, but placed in another setting. Or the meal may be disappointing, or it may be more pleasant than I anticipated, resulting in my adding another photo modifying my knowing about dolmathes. The collection of experiences will influence my behavior the next time I happen to come across the dish.

Man and other animals have films of earlier experiences, but only man can symbolize these pictures through codes. In fact, he can code about code. Both man and beast know. We know the whole of experience. That is, we know more than just the picture; we know flavors, aromas, the warmth of eating among those we love; and we know the novelty of experience. Man can

convey that knowing, that film, by a number of codes. As a human I can write; I can draw; and I can gesticulate. Each of the symbolizing codes has advantages and disadvantages. If I draw a picture of a dolmathe, I identify only the topic; if I mime the experience, I only act out the pleasure of eating; but if I write, the power of language enables me to predicate, to relate topic with act: I love eating Greek food. On the other hand a picture is worth one thousand words, and Yeats reflects:

> O Body swayed to music; O Brightening glance
> How can we know the dancer from the dance.

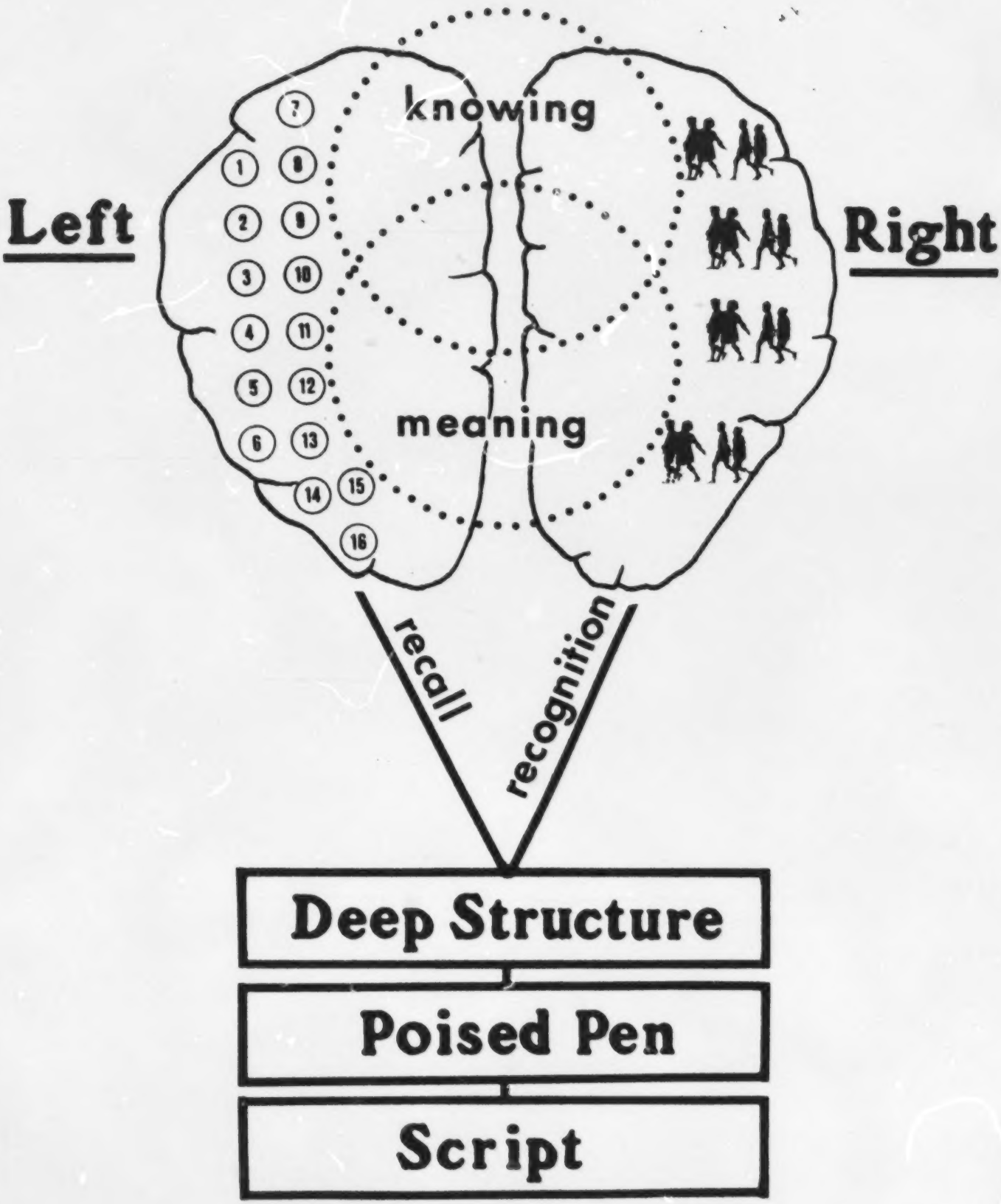
I know my memories and experiences, my cinemas, radio programs, and family albums, but I can only reveal a glimpse to you when I rely on writing. Only flashes come through; consequently, when you read about my knowing, you can never reconstruct totally my knowing.

The three means of composing which I referred to above originate in different areas of the brain. The brain is composed of two hemispheres. The left cerebral lobe is the broadcasting source of my radio program. With it I have the ability to order things, to arrange items in linear fashion whether in time or in sequences of logic. The right lobe is more like my family photograph album, mute but spatial, visual and open. Composing language appears to be largely a function of the left brain; composing art, the right. The left tends to favor converging, seeking closure, while the right, my album, is intuitive and exploratory.

In my album I have pictures of Tyche.

Each brain's specialty develops as we grow. We are not sure if the differentiation is genetically computed or is a result of environment. Until last July I referred to those functions of the hemispheres metaphorically, because I sensed that the subject was becoming a fad. Now, I am not treating this

BRAIN


Left
Right
knowing
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7
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16
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recall
recognition
Deep Structure
Poised Pen
Script

dualism as merely metaphoric, but as a literal explanation of how our knowings have trouble moving from what is in our mind to the print on the page when we compose. If a picture is worth a thousand words, then language, though superior in one way, my be clumsy and awkward in another. Pierce in 1902 identified linguistically unencodable knowings as "qualisigns." I could write exhaustively about the picture in my mind of those two meals of dolmathes, but I could not compose qualisigns of the experience without relying on gesture or drawing, and even then I would fall short of rendering all my knowing of those experiences.

I have modified William Page's model of the "General Concept of Writing and Reading" to demonstrate the process of composing as my knowing moves through five stages to the final manifestation on the printed page.

The first stage is knowing. We know holistically: movies in our minds, volumes of picture albums in the right lobe, and radio programs in the left. But these metaphores don't suggest the roundness, the convolutions of wholeness. Our cinemas have instant replay and are more sensual than the creators of Star Wars will ever be able to imitate.

Furthermore, we often truncate these wholes from chunks of think into a single word or image. The word "Tyche" in my mind connotes synonyms, feelings, syntax, theses, thousands of pictures in the album, and maybe even genetic memories. "Tyche" is a telescoped knowing in my brain. When I think of that name, I feel love, a multitude of associations, memories and events. At this point you don't know my meaning, just my feelings. Tyche is a girl, born April 16, 1965. Tyche is my youngest daughter.

Meaning is the second level in Page's model of the progress of composing. I have gathered the knowings of my life in lumps of think. There are two types: the thought of language and the language of thought. The former is the potential film sound-tract-script; the latter, the qualisigns representing experience, the pictures in my album: Tyche as a baby in Berkeley, Tyche at three on a Mendocino Beach, Tyche playing badminton on our lawn in Eureka.

At the meaning level, the language of thought and the thought of language overlap in both hemispheres. However the left hemisphere is beginning to dominate the meaning of my knowing.

The third level in the journey of conveying my knowing is the deep structure, identified by the transformational linguists. Between the meaning level and the deep structure level, some knowing and meaning, which may be partially stored in the right brain and which may be conveyed by qualisigns, are filtered out, so that only those aspects of knowing and meaning which are encodable in conventional language progress toward script as the final destination. Tyche attends Zane Junior High School.

The fourth level of the process is that point when the writer is about to put pen to paper. The writer is making syntactic and word choices, and if a poet, may draw from the right brain, extending language to convey his picture to the reader. Lewis Carroll did something like this when he came up with the word "chortled" in "Jabberwocky" to convey a manner of laughter, as did Milton when he coined "pandemonium" in Paradise Lost. When she was four years old, Tyche did it when she said, "I want to soft the dog."

Finally when pen meets paper, the process of writing has reached the level of script. It is only here that the writer's and the reader's behaviors are observable. As Page emphasizes this model is static, as are all diagrams of systems; composing knowing involves all kinds of interactions, pulsations, accretions. Yet, the model is a referrent that will be helpful in order to generate hypotheses to be researched. It could lead to understanding why some writers miscue in composing. By studying writers' miscues we might be able to identify the level or source of break down. Eventually someone may devise something for writing miscues as Yetta Goodman and Caroline Burke did for reading with the Reading Miscue Inventory.

Moffett suggests that the so called literacy problem really is superficial. He defines literacy as the act of encoding verbalization into print. Scanning Page's model you can see that Moffett is right in a way. A writer with poised pen has worked his knowing through meaning and the deep structure of syntax and lexicon; he may be able to verbalize easily; all the teacher needs to do is to help him put his speech into print; to edit his transcription. On the other hand, if a writer has a problem before the moment of the poised pen, it is not a literacy problem but a thinking problem. The earlier the break down, the greater the problem. This problem will be compounded at each level as the knowing is processed to writing. But maybe we ought to examine the miscue for insights into the writer's knowing, not just to find out what is wrong.

But, in another way, Moffett is inaccurate that encoding speech into print is just mechanical. The writer poised to write lets a lot of crap get in the way of his composing his knowing. Students are being humiliated by zealous teachers who see writing as wrong or right and who are not looking for meaning. Or, to be more charitable, they conclude too early and judge too quickly that something is going on in the student's head before they hear the student's essential knowing, thereby, damming up the student's flow of language. Apprehension in students, built up by years of the error correction approach to writing, is an educational scandal.

Daly and Miller studied apprehension and writing of entering college students. They found that there was no correlation between students who were very apprehensive when asked to write and low scores on the verbal test of the SAT. As a matter of fact, many students, who scored very high on the verbal test, scored very high as being apprehensive about writing. Furthermore, Daly and Miller did find that there was a high correlation

between those who scored high on both the verbal test and the apprehensive test and those who chose courses and academic majors in which little writing would be demanded of them. In other words people who are verbally able are being driven into fields in which they will not use their talents and powers.

Do teachers of writing know what is good writing? Joe Williams at the University of Chicago studied teachers of composition and college teachers of teachers who would be teaching students to write. What he found is disturbing. These teachers do not recognize good writing according to their own criteria of what constitutes good writing. Before the experiment, they were asked to identify characteristics of mature prose: good writing was direct, natural, clear, logical, concrete, concise, vigorous prose that avoided circumlocution. However, when asked to rank two forms of the same paper, they ranked the paper which was voiceless, full of passive constructions, strings of prepositional phrases, nominalizations, etc., higher than the paper that was direct and fluent. The papers were constructed in such a way that the content, sequence of sentences, and organization were identical, but certain features were changed to make one paper direct, open, and honest and the other evasive, indirect, and opaque.

Consider the following sentences:

A. There was an investigation into the cause of the changes in the cell by the scientists.

B. The scientists investigated why the cell changed.

Most teachers ranked papers that contained sentences like "A" over papers with sentences like "B".

Furthermore, when ranking two forms of a weak, poorly organized paper, many teachers cited papers written in the direct style as lacking content, organization, and mechanics, favoring the indirect, voiceless paper of the

pompous style, even though those very features criticized were held constant. Williams concludes, "A good student who follows his teacher's advice about avoiding wordiness will suffer."

I have performed an experiment about four or five times that includes the following four steps. I have teachers in my class read an article that I wrote. When finished they turn it over. Second, I ask them to write in single words, phrases or whatever, all they can recall having read. Third, I ask each to read what he has written. What comes out is that each reads the article differently. Each reader finds something in the article that no one else recalled. Each drifts toward one of three schools of thought about the so-called central idea of the piece. Some see it as a plea for teachers and parents to read aloud more often than they do; others, that grouping is a prime strategy for handling students that range in ability, and others feel that it is an argument to look at reading in a different way.

Finally, I ask each to analyze why he wrote down what he did. I have heard such responses as "I remembered the idea about reading aloud because I do read aloud to my classes, and I was read to by my parents, but I was struck by the realization that I have never read to my children. I left that up to the TV." or "I recalled the technique about reading in unison with the struggling reader. I play the guitar, and I have found it useful to put any guitar record on the stereo so that I can pick up the rhythm."

Then I ask, "Who gets an 'A'?" They are usually quick to see the stupidity and irrelevance of grading. They see that what they comprehended was greatly influenced by their private knowings. Comprehending as living people is not the comprehension measured on a standardized reading test.

Children have private knowings also. Perhaps they don't have as many movies or pictures in their albums, but they have something we have allowed

to atrophy, an undamaged right brain, which allows them to imagine beyond boundaries and in different vistas than are accessible to us adults.

In this experiment I have involved reading and writing. But how is writing different from reading? At the poised pen level, the writer must recall letter or word or meaning. A reader sees print, recognizing meaning. It is easier to recognize than it is to recall. Let your mind wander: What does a steamshovel look like? However, shown a photograph of a helicopter, a person can describe the image very quickly. Writing requires conveying meaning into alphabetic script. Our alphabet approximates our ideaphonic or spoken language. Yet, our alphabet is not all that phonetic, otherwise we would have more words that sound alike looking alike, such as to, two, too. The writer has to recall these differences, not just rely upon the sound. Recalling is a left brain activity, and recognition, I think, is a function of the right.

Also, writers must go at a slow pace, slower than oral or silent reading. This slower pace taxes the rational left lobe. On the other hand, the reader skims along processing a minimum of the print in front of him. Although the writer's mind is a cinema, he can be distracted by worry over correct spelling, correct agreement, language redundancy (boys <u>are</u>), and by being sure to fill in referents explicitly that the reader may not be familiar with. In conveying the movie in my mind, I have to manipulate the sound-tract-script very carefully, if I want to compose my knowing in flawless prose on the first draft. My point is, though, that that "if" is a myth; the greatest single cause of the inability to write.

Writing is more difficult for the writer than reading is for the reader. Writers must develop the ability to write large numbers of words as units or clusters which represent lumps of think. If we attended to each letter, as

we do when we print words, we would write more slowly than when we write cursive. Moreover, we don't write single letters. Try Frank Smith's test. Write from a to z, then write, "The quick brown fox jumped over the lazy dog." It will take you twice as long to write the alphabet four times as it will take you to write the sentence three times. The total number of letters is nearly equal. We don't write one letter after another; we don't write single words one after the other, either; we pour out clusters of meaning, our chunks of think. Writing is like playing the piano. The pianist blends single notes into integrated, fluid, rhythmic melodies.

Teachers should encourage free writing, expressive writing. Writers who are free are more likely to draw from the right hemisphere, to let language and image flow. If I were to go to my summer cabin, the first time I wanted a glass of water, I would turn on the faucet only to get a glass of rusty sludge. Do I filter, then distill the sludge to get drinkable water? No, I let the faucet run for a while, until I see that the water is clear..

When the child boggs down because of spelling, correct usage, or diction, he is struggling to recall-remember, a more difficult job than to recognize. That recalling is a left hemispheric process, and the more he strains to use that hemisphere, the more convergent, the more precise, will be the result, if he doesn't simply say, "To hell with it, I'm a non-writer."

It is crucial that the young writer understand that spilling lumps of think on the page is legitimate; this is how writers write. The more he deliberates over each letter, each word, or his handwriting, the more he will get into mazes, the more likely that he will forget his flow of knowing. It is like the reader who gets stuck on a word, struggles to sound it out (a lousy practice), and forgets much of the meaning he had constructed while leading up to that blockage.

James Britton's theory of language makes considerable sense. He categorizes the use of language in three modes: the expressive initial stage; the informative; and the reflective. Expressive language is defined as talk written down, a transcription of speech. Britton argues that the young writer must compose in this mode as often as possible. We all should. From these jottings the teacher with help of the writer's peers can then lead the student into one of two directions toward the finished piece: the informative or the reflective.

The final draft of informative writing is at some audience in order to convey a message explicitly; therefore the spelling, at this point, must be correct. The final draft of reflective writing is the result of the teacher and the student sifting out from expressive writing those features that have resonances, that can be shaped in the form of a personal essay, a poem, or a story. Such writing differs from the informative in that the reflective is whole, its message implicit, the sense of the voice heightened, its target the writer himself or an anonymous audience that reads for pleasure.

For this paper I am interested in the expressive mode. Composing knowings in whole discourse on paper without the inhibiting effects of correct spelling, word order, etc., is one of the first steps to writing. The so-called basics get in the way at the first step in composing. Remember, the basics are in the kid's head.

We must look at writing as something more than only the three steps: as impromtu assignment-paper-penned, poisoned, and posited. Composing is a continuous process. Among the early stages is pre-writing or expressive writing. At this level the writer is his own audience, spilling out lumps of think on paper. Frequent free writing exercises can allow language to extend beyond what Page calls the "linguistically unencodable conventions."

Expressive writing can tax the mute, metaphoric right brain so that maybe some of those qualisigns of knowing find expression on the printed page in the form of similes, images, rhythms, or onomatopoetic nonwords.

When we write to inform or write to elevate our voice, we are beyond the stage of spilling out our lumps of think; we then have to attend to handwriting, spelling, diction, and word order. We arrange to subordinate, to emphasize points, to establish sequence, to fill in, etc. Then we edit; now is the time to correct punctuation, spelling, and the other acts of precision so that the paper looks good. If a student is fortunate in having a teacher who practices the language experience approach and who encourages the child to write freely and does not use the error correction methods, and does not grade impromtu writing, then that writer has a better chance to compose the sound-tract-script of his movie. All the teacher needs to do is to listen and read carefully what the child knows.

The most important part of the writing exercise is at the beginning. Teachers have to make sure that the student understands what cinema to convey, the purpose of the assignment, and his audience.

Then teachers will spend less time when the papers come in. Should we even grade student writing? Teachers must ease the tension and apprehension caused by nervous recall of the left brain when the student has his pen poised.

They can do this by substituting error correction with sentence combining. They can do this by looking at writing as a process involving a number of steps, and by not putting the cart before the horse, editing the first draft as the script is drawn from the pen.

They can do this by assigning writing exercises that allow the students to share what they know rather than study something new and write, to inform

the already informed.

Teachers can do this by varying audiences so that students can be rid of trying to psyche out what the teacher wants.

And they can do this by learning to weigh the quality of a student's miscues in writing, by rearranging their priorities: the undotted 'i' is not so important as a misspelled word; a misspelled word is not so important as not knowing the power of subordination; subordination is not so important as voice; the control of voice is not so important as honesty.

Teachers are hindering students from composing their knowings, their movies, by making too much ado of trivia. Teachers transfer their contradictory notions of good writing to students, causing them to make good spelling and phony style more important than composing honestly.

May these teachers and the public who have intimidated the teachers to perform this way reap the fruits of future Richard Nixons.

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